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The Coven

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Greetings All!

This article was written by me several years ago, but I thought it might be of interest here, as it discusses several issues relevant to modern Witches. Any thought or feedback most welcome! Please remember, that although the historical stuff is pretty general, the other parts of the article are my own ideas, and not necessarily applicable outside of my own tradition:)

Covens and Witches

In 1662, Isobel Gowdie of Auldearne made four separate confessions of being a Witch, and in the process, gave the word "Coven" to the world. Although there is no other historical evidence for this word, it has proven to be one of the most lasting facets of Witchcraft - ask anyone today what Witches do, and the answer will almost certainly include the fact that they meet in groups, called "Covens".

So given that a number of modern Witches do, in fact, either run, or belong to, a Coven - just what is its purpose in 20th (and 21st) century Western Civilization? Why has this word of such dubious historical veracity survived over three hundred years? Is there a place in our modern world for a social group which, as far as we know, occurred only in 17th century Scotland?

The very fact of its survival for over three hundred years argues that there is a place for such a group. In my own case, I have been a member of, and run, Covens of Witches for a number of years, and it is a social model which fits extremely well within modern society.

The structure of a coven varies, but generally has one or two leaders, and a number of members of varying levels of experience. In a sense, the modern Coven has replaced the tribal family, and its members often fulfill familial roles, which are no longer available to them in the family in which they were born.

Some researchers have commented that many modern Witches come from a background which was disrupted; i.e., did not provide a safe family environment during their formative years. As I know a great many Witches for whom this was not the case, I think this is only a partial reason, and only for some people.

Humanity itself seems to be inherently tribal; any common bond between people will generally result in the creation cults or sub-cultures, where those of a like-mind will bond together. They will evolve their own social order (generally hierarchical), have their own common language, and often are identifiable by their demeanor and appearance.

Witches gather together in Covens for very much the same sorts of reasons; we are apart from general society by virtue of our beliefs and practices. Meeting with others who think and feel similarly to ourselves gives us the opportunity to share ideas and skills, as well as being able to practice our Craft.

A modern Coven provides a family-style environment, where the "Elders" can, by virtue of their experience, give encouragement, support, and advice to those seek to learn about Witchcraft. As with all families, Covens have very unique and individual ways of approaching this. Just as no two families are the same, neither are any two Covens.

Some Covens are run by people with an academic bent, and as would be the case in any family, this characterizes the way in which their "children" are brought up. Other groups are oriented towards a more simple approach, and the oral traditions play an important role in the way in which the Coven is structured. Some combine the these two approaches, and the variations upon the basic themes are endless.

For any "family" to exist harmoniously, everyone within the group must feel a part of the group, and wish to learn and grow within that group environment. With a path such as Witchcraft, with its emphasis upon personal growth and development, it is likely that individuals who may at one time have been happy within their family group, will change, and wish to move away. This is a perfectly natural process, and the wise coven leaders will send those people off with their love and blessing. Trying to keep them would be like trying to keep your sons and daughters tied to your apron strings forever!

Ultimately, and despite the popularity of the word "coven", I do believe that most Witches are solitary in nature, and will generally spend at least part of their lives without being a member of, or running, a coven. I think the inward exploration during these periods is vital to self-development, just as we believe it is important to encourage social-awareness in children. However, I also believe that at some stage it is important to learn the practices of Witchcraft from another person; to be an apprentice, if you will; because the act of passing knowledge from one person to another cannot be replicated by books, correspondence courses, or be self-taught. This may seem an almost impossible task to some people, but as all the magical traditions teach: when the student is ready, the teacher will appear! What's more, it's true!

B*B Julia

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